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US considering military aid to Kampuchea fighters

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The Reagan administration, contrary to its public statements, is apparently considering using part of a new aid package to noncommunist Kampucheans for "nonlethal" military purposes, sources say. The administration has said the money would be used for civilian purposes only.

The $5 million package, approved by Congress July 31 as part of a foreign aid bill for fiscal year 1986 (which starts in October), is the first overt aid to be provided to the noncommunist Kampucheans by the United States. The bill authorized aid, but was vague on how the money could be spent and by whom. [A State Department official in Washington contacted by the Monitor said that "no decision has been made whatsoever on how the money is to be spent."]

Officially, the Reagan administration says the aid is to be intended for education and skills training for civilian administrators of the two noncommunist factions of the guerrilla Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea.

But in meetings held both in the United States and Southeast Asia, officials of the US Agency for International Development (AID) — assigned to identify ways of spending the money — discussed military projects, according to the informed sources.

One such project was leadership training for guerrilla officers. Another was the updating and printing of a political warfare manual to be used by the guerrillas. AID is also believed to have discussed using the money to make uniforms and train guerrilla paramedics.

Some AID officials are thought to be reluctant to get involved in the sort of military programs mentioned. And the US State Department is reportedly unenthusiastic about the whole idea.

Some skeptical officials say that the money is big enough to draw the US deeper into the Kampuchea issue but not big enough to influence the progress of the war.

An AID mission visited the Thai-Kampuchean border in June. Senior administration officials say they came back with a lengthy list of possibilities for civilian use. So far, administration officials have refused to discuss details of the mission's findings.

The initiative for the $5 million aid package came from a liberal Democrat, Rep. Stephen J. Solarz of New York. After a fruitless visit by Mr. Solarz to Hanoi to discuss Kampuchea, his subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific proposed last March that $5 million be given to Thailand for "appropriate" assistance, including military aid, to the two noncommunist coalition factions in Kampuchea. (Vietnam invaded Kampuchea in 1978 and maintains political control through the ruling Khmer government.)

The money was intended to put more pressure on Vietnam to come to a negotiated settlement of the Kampuchea question and to strengthen the noncommunists with respect to their rather hostile coalition partner, the communist Khmer Rouge.

The amount of aid money is usually described as symbolic, although the originators of the idea calculated that it would be enough to equip 16,000 more fighters — a 60 percent increase over the noncommunists' present fighting strength.

The aid proposal also comes at a time when the coalition has yet to prove that it has recovered from the major reverses suffered during a Vietnamese offensive earlier this year. The reverses have deepened the doubts some US officials have long harbored about the noncommunists' effectiveness.

The new aid will supplement covert assistance the US has provided since the coalition's creation in 1982. This assistance, channeled through the Central Intelligence Agency, is described by officials as "nonlethal."

"You can't kill people with money," says one person closely involved with the issue. In fact, according to sources from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), little effort is made to monitor the end-use of the funds. The usual estimate of CIA aid is $7 million annually; but well-informed sources, including ASEAN officials, say they expect the amount to grow this year. The assistance is apparently provided in coordination with ASEAN. A committee including representatives from Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, and the US was reportedly founded for this purpose last year. The CIA represents the US.

The covert US aid also includes intelligence support for the noncommunists, who have long been training with US military manuals. Other aid to the noncommunists — covert, or at least unacknowledged — includes military training by Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand. Singapore also provides military hardware. And ASEAN countries give intelligence aid.

China is the only supplier of military and financial aid to the Khmer Rouge but also provides much of the noncommunists' military supplies. US officials are not allowed to have direct contact with the Khmer Rouge, although they are known to have done so on special projects, such as the effort to prove the existence of "yellow rain" — Vietnamese chemical and biological warfare.

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